

Parting Is Such Sweet

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Exactly three years ago I recounted a familiar family experience, namely the effect on Mother when the first child leaves home.

At that time sage women told me the wrench felt during the early separation from the little person (18 or older) would be repeated as each child left the nest. They were right.

During this last week hundreds of mothers have been put in the position of surrendering their offspring to state universities or colleges. And we're constantly plagued by the possibility that those venerable institutions, regardless of their imperial costs, are not as worthy of our young people as we are.

It's a challenge for the places of higher learning to qualify as recipients of our young. Yet the amazing part is that the boys and girls eagerly opt for the places away from home. Though we raised them to grow up and away, it's always a shock to us when they leave. Consequently, a metamorphosis ensues not only for the one leaving, but for the one left . . . "Aloner" than she's been since he was born.

It astonished me Sunday, as I leaned against the car outside a coed dormitory, the distance we'd traveled in 18 years, from an absolutely dependent tiny person in a drawstring blue-checked nightgown to a tall person in tee shirt and jeans who's in charge of self-proclaimed independence.

And the schools are different from what they used to be. Gone are the rosy-cheeked housemothers greeting demure maidens in charming dormitory lounges. Forever a memory are early curfews, the nightly bedchecks and the off limits rooms of tender maidens.

I tell you it's a shocker, even the second time around. And kids are going to college now with the aid of U-Hauls for possessions parents still don't have. I watched a lissome lass from New York unloading her station wagon as her mother sighed with a mixture of relief and despair. The student had a television set, a stereo, a broiler/toaster affair, steamer trunk and enough clothing to outfit all the Jaycee women on the South Shore.

Two other girls had boxes of plants with which to stock their rooms so as to inspire the envy of any horticulturalist. And they

all seemed to have everything under control, especially as soon as the parents left. I saw one mother making up her son's bed, all fresh and clean, one final gesture . . . that I didn't make.

Among all those people on campus the only ones who looked confused were parents. We surrendered our children like we would an impacted wisdom tooth, for the general good, but not without pain. And I saw a sign as we drove away on a fence by a field of raspberries. The sign said picking of the berries would resume Wednesday. The day being Sunday I figured I could show up there, pick a few berries, drop by the dorm to say hello . . .

But of course that was a mother's momentary fantasy, thinking she could oversee a life that was let loose upon the world. That's the point, you see, we should learn from the first one, but we don't. You can take the child away from the mother but you can never take the mother out of a woman.

Anyway instead mothers go home to clean the room vacated by a college student. She polishes and cleans his home sanctuary, and puts his childhood away . . . the baseball trophies, the pictures of the boy and the dog when both were pups, the Earth, Wind & Fire album that is silent in his absence.

And while the new bigtime students are buying books, organizing their sneakers in the closet and being introduced (properly) to classmates, Mother is making her adjustments. She's trying not to boil too many potatoes, giving the cat the milk before it goes sour for want of a human consumer, and taking the leaf out of the kitchen table . . . again.

But most mothers are lucky. They still have the father of the child who went away. It's his duty, and one he takes to with ease, to remind the old girl that he who goes away will come home with dirty laundry, among which are the good towels.

And what's more, the parents are put on notice, repeatedly, that they're going to be left with one another, if they're lucky. It'll be back to the pre-crib, pre-baseball, pre-prom days. And, you know that's titillating. We don't remember what we were like b.c. (Before Children).

Just think, some day the last of the birds will fly the coop. My immediate reaction is one of sadness. My secondary thought, however, may be an awareness that there are other things to do besides parenting. Meantime, though, in the September Separation, Mother is still trying to understand a void that's home in the place of a kid who's "Outta here."

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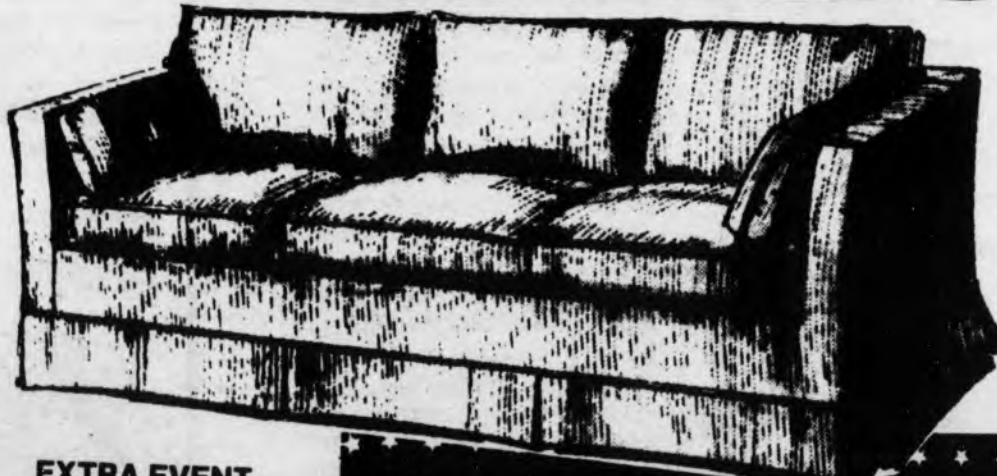
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